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Historical Society OF Southern California LOS ANGELES CALIFORNIA

1905

LOS ANGELES FIFTY YEARS AGO

Read before Historical Society, April 16, 1905

By H. D. Barrows

The first time that I ever heard that there was such a place as Los Angeles, was in the summer of 1854, at Benicia, where, in buying some fruit, which at that time, was both of indifferent quality and scarce, as well as dear, a friend told me that Los Angeles grapes would, later, be in the market and that they would be far superior to any other kind of fruit then to be had.

I arrived in Los Angeles December 12, 1854, and it has been my home ever since. I came from San Francisco on the steamer "Goliah," in company with the late William Wolfskill, the Pioneer, and his nephew John Wolfskill, the latter still a resident of this county. The fare on the steamer at that time was forty dollars. Arriving at the Port of San Pedro, we came ashore on a lighter, and from thence by stage to Los Angeles, where we arrived about noon.

There are many striking contrasts between both the city and county of that day, and the Los Angeles of today. Topographically, this then, was an imperial county, including, as it did, all of San Bernardino and Orange counties, and the greater part of the present county of Riverside. The immense valley

or series of valleys, lying between the great, grisly Sierra Madre or series of valleys, lying between the great grizzly Sierra Madre mountains and the ocean, and extending 80 or 90 miles from Simi Pass, to Mount San Bernardino, at that period was one vast, almost treeless region, over which roamed unnumbered cattle, horses and sheep. The planting since of the various species of the Australian Eucalypti, and of continuous orange, walnut and other orchards, throughout these valleys, has radically changed their appearance. To the new-comer of today, the landscape of these prairie-valleys of Southern California presents the appearance of a wooded country, similar to other sections of the United States.

The city of Los Angeles, when I first saw it, half a century ago, was a one-story, adobe town, of less than five thousand inhabitants, a large portion of whom were of Spanish descent, and among whom, of course Spanish customs and the use of the Spanish language prevailed. There were, I think, not to exceed three or four two-story buildings in the town.

Behold, what a magical change half a century has wrought! The population of the former Spanish Pueblo or Ciudad of 5,000 or less, has risen to nearly 200,000 souls. The quaint, flat-roofed white-washed, one-story houses, clustering around or near the Plaza, have given way to splendid, fire-proof, brick and steel blocks, of two, three, five and ten stories; and to picturesque, luxurious homes extending throughout and beyond the four square leagues of territory granted to the ancient Pueblo, by the King of Spain, under whose authority its foundations were laid by that wise Spanish Governor, Don Felipe de Neve, nearly a century and a quarter ago.

When I first came here, Los Angeles had but one Roman Catholic church edifice, that fronting the plaza; and not one Protestant or other church building. How many places of worship there are now, of the numerous religious sects of the city and county, I do not know. There were then but two public school houses in the city: one, on the site of the present Bryson Block, on Spring street; the other, was located on the east side of Bath street, north of the Plaza. Today there are, I know not how many, large, commodious school buildings scattered throughout the widely extended sections of the municipality, and new ones are constantly being built, to meet the pressing necessities of our rapidly increasing population. The number of pupils attending the two schools in '54, probably did not exceed 200. The number of children between the ages

of 5 and 17 years, who attended the public schools during the school year 1903-1904, as reported by Superintendent Foshay, was 29,072; and of those who attended private schools 2,322;—making the total number of both public and private school pupils, 31,394.

By the census of April, 1904, there were 35,411 children between the ages of 5 and 15; and 9,812 under five years; or altogether, 45,223 children of 17 years and under in Los Angeles one year ago. I think it a fair statement to say that at the present time there must be at least 50,000 children; and that the total population of the city must be not far from 200,000.

We had no High, Polytechnic, or Normal schools in those early years. Los Angeles was so isolated from all the rest of the world, and so difficult of access, that first-class teachers were not easily obtained; and when one was secured he or she was retained if possible by any reasonable increase of salary.

In the early '50s, I think we had but one District (Superior) court, presided over by Judge Benjamin Hayes, and later by Judge Pablo de la Guerra, of Santa Barbara, who in turn was succeeded by Judge Ygnacio Sepulveda, who is now connected with the United States Embassy at the City of Mexico. The former jurisdiction of this district included besides Los Angeles, the counties of San Diego and Santa Barbara. We had also a County Court, and court of Sessions which was also a Probate Court, over which Judge Wm. G. Dryden presided for many years.

We had besides a U. S. District Court in the fifties, of which I. S. K. Ogier was the presiding Judge. This Southern district included all the southern part of the State extending to a line just north of the city of Santa Cruz. Sessions of this court were held alternately at Monterey and Los Angeles. In those early days of the fifties, we had no horse or steam railroads or telegraphs. Electric roads, telephones, bicycles, automobiles and the like, so necessary to our recent modern life, were totally unknown anywhere.

We had no paved streets or sidewalks. We had no elevators, because, first, we had no use for them as our houses were of but one story; and second, because elevators were unknown. Type-writing machines and Linotype printing machines, and operators of the same, were unknown and unthought of. We had no gas, and electric-lighting had not been invented. We had, I think, but one book store, and, although modest attempt to establish a public library was made, it soon petered out. I know

I contributed a few books to it, but I remember that, having made a trip to the Atlantic States in '57, when I came back, I learned that the library had been abolished and that the books, including those I had donated, had been sold.

We had neither mercantile nor savings banks during the entire decade of the '50s, and but few money safes. All merchandise not produced here, was brought from San Francisco by steamer or sail-vessels, lightered at San Pedro, and brought up to town by big mule trains of "prairie schooners." Until vineyards and orchards were planted and came to bearing in the upper country, after the change of Government, the people of that part of the State, including the population of the mining regions, depended on the vineyards of Los Angeles for their fruit. I know that for several years large shipments of mission grapes, the only kind grown here then, were made by each steamer during the grape season. The "vignerones" here, realized all the way from one to two bits, (reales) a pound for their grapes. Other fruits besides the "mission grape" (which was originally brought from Spain, and which was one of the best raised there,) were scarce here also, as well as in the north, and generally of inferior quality, until improved varieties were introduced from the eastern states. Among the enterprising pioneers who first brought the best standard fruits and vegetables to Los Angeles, were Dr. Wm. B. Osborne, Los Angeles' first Postmaster, H. C. Cardwell, O. W. Childs, etc.

The Hollisters of Santa Barbara brought a flock of American improved sheep all the way from Ohio to Los Angeles, arriving here in the early part of 1854. Los Angeles was long known as one of the "Cow counties," as stock raising was extensively carried on throughout Southern California for some years under American rule, as it had been in mission times; and it was very profitable even in spite of occasional severe drouths, as these countries were natural grass countries: burr-clover, alfileria and wild oats being especially valuable indigenous grasses. Cattle did not need to be fed and housed in winter in our mild climate, as they are required to be fed in colder countries. Besides the best known breeds of horse, sheep and neat cattle stock were gradually introduced. But eventually, as the admirable adaptation of Southern California for the perfection in growth of citrus fruits was demonstrated, and the splendid seedless navel orange was discovered the immense cattle ranges were gradually converted into orange and lemon orchards. The English Walnut crop has been found to be profitable here also, and thus, as we now see, our orch-

ards have taken the place of what were formerly extensive cattle ranges.

In '55, the "Star," established in '51 by McElroy and Lewis, and the "Southern California," published by Wheeler and Butts, both weekly, were the only local newspapers Los Angeles could boast of. We heard from the outside world by steamer from San Francisco, twice a month.

When Johnny Temple built a theatre in '58, on the site of the present Bullard Block, our list of entertainments was somewhat enlarged. Instead of high-toned "Horse Shows" like that just held in Pasadena, we sometimes had in those primitive times, Bear and Bull fights, cock fights and frequent horse, mule and donkey races, and occasionally a Spanish circus, or "maroma," and at Christmas times we were regaled with the quaint, beautiful characteristically-Spanish "Pastorela," which was very effectively and charmingly presented by a thoroughly trained company under the direction of Don Antonio Coronel. So that despite our isolation, we had many and varied amusements.

Of the adult people of Los Angeles who were living here when I came here, and with whom I gradually became more or less acquainted very very few are now alive, although many of their children have grown up, and have become heads of families.

I cannot suppress a feeling of sadness as I recall the past and review the changes that have occurred, in persons, and scenes that now, as I look back seem but dreams, but which then were indeed so real. And the thought arises, if such great changes have occurred during the past fifty years, who can tell or even imagine what Los Angeles will be fifty years hence, or what is in store for our children and grandchildren? Of the present citizens of Los Angeles except the younger portion, very few indeed will then be alive. And although we may strain our eyes to peer into the future,

"And strive to see what things shall be;"—

* * * * *

"Events and deeds for us exist,
As figures moving in a mist;
And what approaches—bliss or woe—
We cannot tell, we may not know—
Not yet, not yet!"—